This is supposed to be the first Sunday of Lent, but that can’t be right because the first Sunday of Lent usually follows Ash Wednesday. But because Central Kentucky suddenly turned into Alaska, we had to postpone and then cancel our Ash Wednesday service, which means that today is really like Ash Wednesday, because it is the first day we’re celebrating Lent. That means that this coming Wednesday will be the first Sunday in Lent. So please mark your calendars to join us on Palm Thursday, Maundy Sunday, Good Tuesday and Easter Friday.

The season of Lent has always been a bit of an enigma to us Disciples. The church I served in Illinois bristled at the idea of celebrating Lent. “Too Catholic,” they said. “Too much of a bummer.” Well…yes. There’s some truth to that. Lent isn’t meant to be a six-week party leading up to Easter. Historically, one of the purposes of Lent was to help potential candidates prepare for their baptism through self-examination and recognition of their need for a savior. You spent six weeks acknowledging your sinfulness and shortcomings and all the ways you have disappointed God. See, Lent isn’t a bummer!

More recently, Lent has become a time of introspection and sacrifice, usually marked by giving up something like chocolate or Starbucks. Originally, this idea of giving up was to remove any barriers between you and God. By fasting from this obstruction, it cleared the pathway for you to connect with God and see more clearly your need for a savior. But that’s flawed thinking. How is chocolate keeping me from connecting with God? This year I’m taking a stand against this hurtful tradition of giving up things; I’m going to eat as much chocolate as possible during Lent. Who’s with me?

Seriously, Lent has become so synonymous with giving up something that we forget the original purpose of the season. It’s a time of learning about ourselves, seeing both the good in us and the places where we have fallen short. It’s about recognizing our human condition and acknowledging the areas in which we should strive to be less like the world and more like Christ. It’s about remaking ourselves, building a spiritual body that reflects the image of God within us by living out Godly characteristics like love, grace, and forgiveness. And each one of us has some work to do.

Our personal trainer for this five-week shape-up program will be James, who tells us that the first part of our body we need to work on is our ears. He says we need to have big ears. Not just slightly-larger-than-average ears, James says. Big ears. You know the way we build our muscles is to use them repeatedly. In that case, we should all have humongous snow-shoveling muscles by now. The more you use a muscle, the stronger it gets and the bigger it grows. So how do we get big ears? James says, “By using them.”

“Let everyone be quick to listen and slow to speak.” It sounds so simple, doesn’t it? How many embarrassing situations could we have saved ourselves from by following this simple rule? I can remember many times where, even as the words are coming out of my mouth, I want to grab them and stuff them back in. But we can’t un-communicate. That’s why we listen first and speak next. As they say, “A closed mouth gathers no foot,” and yet how often do we jump in with our words before hearing the words of others?
The biblical translation The Message says it this way: “Lead with your ears, and follow up with your tongue.” That’s a marriage counseling session in one sentence. Of course, our ability to lead with our ears goes beyond the size of our ears; it centers on the focus of our attention. Research says people only remember 50% of what they hear immediately after hearing it. Therefore, I am going to preach this sermon twice during this service and pray that you’ll remember 50% of it each time. If we really want to hear something, we have to be listening for it, we have to be paying attention. When I taught public speaking, we would talk about the technique of faking attention, where we nod our heads and say our “um-hums” in all the right places, but aren’t really paying attention. We’re faking attention. I see many of you nodding your head and saying “um-hum” in agreement. Or are you faking it? Too many of our conversations lack the rich connectedness of a relationship because we simply don’t listen. Our minds are too preoccupied.

I see this a lot, especially on social media. As more and more of our conversations are virtual rather than face-to-face, we are being conditioned to listen to the other person for the purpose of formulating our response. We listen with an agenda, just waiting for our chance to interject what we have to say, which is obviously more important than what they have to say. We listen for the purpose of trying to change their mind or pointing out what’s wrong with their viewpoint or fixing their problem. And when all that is going through our minds while they’re speaking, are we really listening? Lead with your ears.

This way of listening on social media spills over into our face-to-face conversations. How would the nature and quality of our interactions change if we approached each one with the goal of completely and fully listening to the other person? It’s hard to silence the rebuttal machine in our brains, but it’s important to remember that holding your tongue doesn’t count as listening. Or, as someone else put it, never miss a good opportunity to shut up. As we interact with others, how would the nature of our relationships change if we made a conscious effort, as Henri Nouwen put it, “to withdraw into ourselves out of humility, so that we create the space for the other person to be themselves?” When we talk, we take up a lot of space. What if we listened to others with the same intensity and effort that we usually save for talking? What would we hear that we’re currently missing? If we take the time to truly listen to someone else, we send them the message that they are important to us, that they matter to us. The greatest gift we can give to someone else is the attention of our big ears.

Of course, listening well to others is good practice for our most important listening, which is listening to God. We should take time to listen to God for the simple reason that God takes time to listen to us. The Bible is full of examples of God listening to his people. Psalm 66 says, “God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.” As Jesus is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, he looks up and says, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.” God is always listening. He says through the prophet Isaiah, “Before my people call I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear.”

And God call us to listen, as well. One of my favorite Psalm passages says, “Be still and know that I am God.” Sometimes when I read that I hear it as a word of comfort, but most often I hear it as an admonishment to my current behavior. “Be still! I’m trying tell you something. I’m God. You’re not. I have something to say. Be still and listen.”

Relationships grow through the give and take of communication, as we each talk and listen. God listens to us, and God has a word of comfort, a word of hope, a word of
good news with which to respond. John Ortberg says that in the Bible Samuel prayed, “Speak, God, for your servant is listening,” but too often we say in prayer, “Listen, God, for your servant is speaking.”

Do we give God the space to speak to us, or is God’s voice crowded out by all the other noise? We are so good at faking attention with God, bowing our heads and saying “Amen” in all the right places, but letting other responsibilities and distractions take priority over our time with God. Our growth as a person of faith depends upon our paying attention to God, our dialogue with our Creator, our ability to listen for what God is saying to us.

God speaks to us through our prayers, through other people, through scripture. I heard God speak to me through Laura Barkhauer, who said, “You should go to seminary.” I heard God speak to me through scripture, when Psalm 121 promised me God would not let my foot stumble. I heard God speak to me through an email that said, “This is Wayne Shaver and I’d like to talk to you about our senior minister opening at Crestwood Christian Church.” I’ve heard God speak to me through many people, but I’ve probably missed God speaking to me in thousands of other ways because I wasn’t listening. We’ll never hear God if we don’t pay attention and take the time to listen. Our relationship with God will only develop as a dialogue, not a monologue, and Lent is a wonderful time to make the commitment to that.

Lead with your ears. Be quick to listen. There is so much need around us, but I believe the greatest need people have is a need to be heard, a need to be acknowledged and accepted and validated as a valuable human being. To be able to answer that need, we first have to create a space for God’s word in our lives, we have to listen to what God is saying to us. May God give us all big ears for listening, so that we can respond faithfully by saying, “Speak, God, for your servant is listening.”